



Old Man



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Chapter 1 by stayawesomerrr

I lived next door to Old Man Werther for the first seven years of my life, but I only ever saw him twice. No-one in the neighbourhood knew much about him or ever saw him leave his house, which stood dark and silent all year round. His back garden was always a mess, with dying flowers and brown scratchy shrubs growing out of control. But the grass and the bushes never became quite so badly overgrown that you knew it was entirely neglected. My dad used to joke that Mr. Werther must tend to his garden in the dead of night.

My best friend, N, lived next-door-but-one, with Old Man Werther in-between. N was mad about football, and all we ever seemed to do after school was boot the ball around one of our back yards, and of course, every five minutes the ball would be over the fence onto our reclusive neighbour's property. We'd learnt that knocking on his door was no use, so whoever kicked it had to clamber over the fence and retrieve it themselves. I dreaded going and rooting through the tall bushes for the ball. Sometimes I thought I saw the curtains twitch in the gloom.

N was always bolder than I was, and he'd tease me as he knew I was afraid. Hanging over the fence watching, he'd shout that Old Man Werther was looking out of an upstairs window, then a downstairs window, then he was opening his back door. I wasn't quite gullible enough to believe him but still I couldn't breathe until he'd gone and flung myself to safety.

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he was just winding me up. A thin kitchen window was always open a crack, and he'd suggest we try to open it further and climb inside to see if the old man had secretly croaked years ago, as was widely assumed.

One afternoon after school I was aimlessly kicking the ball about, alone as N hadn't called round even though he'd said he would. Inevitably, the ball soon went over; in horror, I watched it bounce against a knackered old oak tree and sail straight down to Old Man Werther's house, much closer than I'd ever been before. My heart still, it took an eternity to creep along through the long yellowed grass, before finally lifting the ball and feeling like Indiana Jones when he held aloft that little golden statue. Emboldened, I was compelled to have a quick look through the nearest window.

Nothing. Just a pure black hole, with tattered brown curtains on either side. I was about to turn and stride away when I saw movement. A face appeared.

It was my friend N. He was only there for a second. His face was bright red; he looked me in the eyes through floods of tears. I couldn't hear him through the dirty glass but it looked like he was screaming his little lungs out. Then an arm, so thin and pale that it looked like a bone, hooked N beneath his chin and he vanished. The curtains were thrust shut.

Three seconds later I was hammering at my back door to be let in. My mum thought I was messing about at first, then she suggested that I had imagined things; She knew I was scared of our strange neighbour. But she soon began to take me seriously, and phoned N's mother, who was awfully surprised as N hadn't returned from school, so she'd assumed he had gone straight round to my house. The police were called; several officers visited Old Man Werther while a nice young officer spoke to me for what seemed about four hours. But no trace of N was ever found, despite two further searches over the next few days.

The same young officer returned a week later and told me that Mr. Werther wasn't a suspect, and that maybe my mind had been playing tricks. She pointed out that Mr. Werther was in his late eighties, and had never been in any kind of trouble before. But she seemed troubled, and unsure of her own words. Something came to light during the investigation that surprised the

whole neighbourhood. Old Man Werther was a brilliant children's illustrator. The police had found his sketches all over his walls. He'd worked with the same printer who illustrated the children's novels a year

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I wasn't a big reader but I knew I'd spotted one of their books in our school library, so I didn't waste any time the next day, I couldn't wait to have a look. I soon wished I hadn't. It was a cheesy novel featuring a group of kids around my age who solved a burglary or something. There were fifteen or sixteen illustrations, breaking up the text. One picture was of three boys playing football in a suburban backyard. And they didn't half resemble me, N and another lad we knew. Even the clothes were similar. Hands trembling, I flicked through the book. There I was again, along with more kids who all seemed to closely resemble ones who lived near me. One picture showed N creeping through an overgrown garden to peer through a dark window.

I shoved the book in my mum's face and blabbered about the spooky similarities. But it was a drained and listless face. My mum had changed a great deal over that long week. N's mum was a good friend, and N himself had that rambunctious cheekiness that all mums seem to love. The neighbourhood had changed forever, and we only stayed there for another few weeks before finding a new house across town. She assured me that any resemblance was a coincidence; that it was all in my little mind. I spent those last weeks in the old house terrified by the thought of Old Man Werther peering from his upstairs windows, from where he had a clear view of nine or ten local backyards, and maybe twenty local children. I didn't like to play football there anymore.

I cycled back to the old street once or twice over the years, figuring that Old Man Werther must have died by then. I think I was seeking confirmation of some sort. But each time I returned, that one house stood out in the otherwise bright and lively road, with its dead plants and dank windows. He'd be over 100 now, but perhaps he's still in there, I don't know. The last time I ever went back, I saw the young family who had moved into our old house. Their five kids aged about three to ten were screaming with delight as they kicked a football around.

The second time I saw Old Man Werther was a few days before we moved away. I'd become a very troubled young man and my fitful sleep was filled with torments. Waking in a familiar panic at around midnight, I sat up in bed and peered out of the window over the backyard. Under the bright full moon I saw a figure next door.

He was just skin and bone but very tall, bald on top with long tangled silver hair down to his

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what sprinkled onto the plants didn't look like water, it was thick and black, and it looked more like blood.

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